

Community Assistantship Program

**Evaluation of the Farm Beginnings
Mentorship Program**

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Prepared in partnership with
Land Stewardship Project

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Evaluation of the Farm Beginnings Mentorship Program

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August 28, 2002

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Executive Summary

Farm Beginnings, a program of the Land Stewardship Project, serves families in western Minnesota interested in starting to farm or seeking to make changes in their current farming system. Farm Beginnings has just begun to implement a formal mentoring process to increase: beginning farmer communication and cooperation with established farmers, the number of established farmers committed to new farmers, and community interest and support of local farmers. Mentor and protégé pairs are established in the early spring and participate in a one-on-one mentorship during the summer months. This year, two evening training sessions were offered in an effort to provide pairs with an opportunity to meet and discuss expectations and goals for the mentorship. An evaluation of the mentorship program was developed and implemented over the summer of 2002 to gauge the success of the mentorship, the effectiveness of the mentor training, and to seek out any improvements for the program.

In general, experiences were very positive and contact between the pairs ranged from little to frequent, depending on: proximity to each other, prior connections, willingness of protégés to ask for help, accessibility of mentors, and scheduling conflicts. Barriers affecting interactions and communication between the pairs included compromising busy schedules and issues in miscommunication. Making changes in the format and material of the mentor training could avoid these barriers and encourage a more productive and rewarding mentorship. The mentor training could be used to model a structure for pairs who otherwise wouldn't create the structure on their own. In this manner, pairs would be better able to plan their individual mentorships.

Introduction

Farm Beginnings, a program of the Land Stewardship Project, serves families in western Minnesota interested in starting to farm or seeking to make changes in their current farming systems. Throughout the year-long training, Farm Beginnings participants improve their decision-making and planning skills through connection and interaction with a network of established farmers and supportive community members. Farm Beginnings has just begun to implement a formal mentoring process to increase: beginning farmer communication and cooperation with established farmers, the number of established farmers committed to new farmers, and community interest and support of local farmers. Mentor and protégé pairs are established in the early spring and participate in a one-on-one mentorship during the summer months. Protégés are matched with mentors who have similar operations. In cases where protégés are looking to make changes in their operation, mentors are chosen who have experience in the direction the protégé would like to move. Frequency and medium of interaction between the pairs is not structured by the program. This year, mentor/protégé pairs were established in March of 2002 and two evening "training" sessions were offered in April, 2002. These sessions were structured to provide pairs with an opportunity to meet and discuss expectations and goals. A presentation on respectful and effective communication was given and pairs were asked to discuss priorities and goals for the mentorship with each other. An evaluation of the mentorship program was developed and implemented over the summer of 2002 to gauge the success of the mentorship, the effectiveness of the mentor training, and to seek out any improvements for the program.

Methods

Of the eight protégés and nine mentors participating in the program, seven protégés and six mentors were interviewed. The questions were developed by the research assistant with advice from the supervisor. The questionnaire consisted of both open-ended and closed questions (see Appendix). Ten one-on-one interviews were conducted in person at the participants' farm site and three were conducted over the phone. Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes and consisted of 16 questions. Notes were taken during the interviews and within 10-30 minutes following each interview, notes were filled in with greater detail. Interview questions were organized into six categories in order to answer broader questions about: prior expectations, learning from one another, effective communication, connecting to the farming community, future actions, and the mentor training.

Findings

In general, experiences were very positive and contact between the pairs ranged from little to frequent, depending on: proximity to each other, prior connections, willingness of protégés to ask for help, accessibility of mentors, and scheduling conflicts.

Prior expectations

Before the mentorship began, protégé expectations included: learning from experienced farmers about specific enterprises, connecting with people sharing similar interests, learning different ways of doing things, and using mentors as a resource for advice, ideas, and questions. Most mentors expected that they would function as a resource for questions, recommendations, advice and help. Some pairs expected little because they were aware of how busy they or their mentor/protégé would be. For the most part, expectations were met or exceeded. Where expectations were not fully met, time and miscommunication were factors that prevented pairs from connecting.

Learning from one another

The diversity of knowledge or insight gained from protégés interacting with mentors reflected the value of these relationships. Protégés expressed a wide range of practical knowledge and advice learned from mentors regarding specific operations. The pairing of mentors and protégés with similar operation interests facilitates this kind of shared learning. Lessons learned were also more abstract, including patience, a better taste of reality, and zest for life.

For the most part, protégés felt that mentors were helpful in steering them more closely towards their farming goals, but they were not dependent on the mentors to achieve these goals. Many protégés commented that their goals would have eventually been reached without the mentors, but it was nice to have the additional support and advice. One protégé noted that their goals were made more attainable and realistic by having positive interactions with their mentor and encouragement from someone who has found success in their own operation.

Many mentor/protégé pairs visited each others' farms or contacted each other when questions arose. All pairs expressed ease and comfort with communication and information sharing. Certainly there is awkwardness at the onset of a relationship, but no pairs regarded personality conflicts as a barrier to communication. Some pairs had more

frequent contact than others, but it is difficult to use this as a gauge of an effective mentorship. Pairs who did not meet very often expressed that they had hoped for more contact, but were pleased with the connections and relationships they had made.

Effective communication

The biggest barriers to communication throughout the summer were compromising busy schedules and issues of miscommunication. In one case, the mentor and protégé were 60 miles apart, which added to the difficulty in getting together. Several pairs expressed that they were waiting for the other to call, and were unsure of who was "in charge" of initiating interaction. Several mentors expressed that they did not want to force interaction with their protégés and were not interested in initiating contact. Protégés expressed no hesitation to contact their mentors when questions arose and they felt comfortable and satisfied with their mentors' response. However, in cases where contact was minimal because protégés did not have many questions, mentors expressed that they had hoped for more contact. Mentors were very willing to be of assistance and tended to feel underutilized in pairs that did not meet very often.

Several pairs knew each other before the mentorship began and in some cases were neighbors or good friends. In one case, the mentor and protégé lived ½ mile apart and had an informal mentorship for years. They have not done anything differently since the "formal" mentorship began because they have always had close and frequent contact. In general, pairs who had close association previously or lived relatively close to each other seemed to have the most contact.

Connection to the farming community

Several mentors and protégés noted that the mentorship was a component of their connection to the farming community. Many people have other avenues of connection including work with extension, neighborhoods, community groups, or relationships with other farmers. These people viewed the connections they made through the mentorship as an extension of an already existing community network. Many farmers who grew up on the farm did not feel any more connected to the farming community because they already felt as connected as they could be. One farmer who was relatively new to the community did note that she felt more connected to the farming community as a result of the mentorship.

Future actions

All protégés interviewed would definitely recommend a mentorship to a beginning farmer and most mentors are open to mentor again in the future. Mentors that were hesitant about mentoring again were mainly concerned about their ability to devote the time to do an adequate job. Protégés said they would feel comfortable approaching mentors after the formal mentorship is over and pairs generally expect to keep in contact. Some pairs expressed that they hoped to have more contact over the winter because both parties would be less busy.

Mentor training

There were mixed responses regarding the effectiveness of the training. For all, the training was beneficial in that it provided an opportunity to break the ice and get to

know one another. Only a few participants said that the training added to their experience by establishing markers and goals for their mentorship. For pairs who had not met before, the task of communicating expectations of the relationship without knowing the person was said to be difficult. Whether or not all pairs did it, most everyone agreed that it is a good idea to discuss expectations and goals before the mentorship begins.

Some participants found the presentation on effective communication to be helpful and worthwhile, while others did not find it relevant to the mentorship or simply could not remember the presentation. It seemed to be that those who valued the presentation were also people who had jobs where communicating with others on a regular and effective basis is important. These people expressed that reminders on respectful and effective communication are always helpful in any facet of life. Those who did not find the presentation relevant to their situation would have valued more time with their mentor/protégé. Overall, there was consensus that the training succeeded in bringing people together and the same outcome would have been achieved without the presentation on effective communication. In other words, the presentation was not regarded as impacting the mentorship experience in any way.

Recommendations for Change

Participants were also asked to suggest improvements or changes for the mentorship program and the mentor training. Very constructive and thoughtful suggestions were given on both aspects.

Suggestions for the mentorship

Overall, there was praise and acclaim for the program and people did not find it easy to offer suggestions. There was a general consensus that no matter the guidelines or structure encouraged or enforced by the program, pairs would work out only what they could manage. In cases where pairs did not connect very much, it was agreed that more structure would have been helpful, but at the same time it is hard to enforce a structure on busy lives. Specific recommendations made included:

- pairing individuals who live relatively close to each other (60 miles is too far),
- matching up mentors/protégés earlier in the year so they can develop a relationship and begin meeting before the busy summer takes over,
- adjusting the timeline so there is more time to connect in slower times of the year,
- encouraging a binding relationship through shared work so that both parties are invested in the relationship,
- scheduling quarterly visits (more enforcement from the program coordinator),
- scheduling protégé's farm tour around the mentor,
- having a session in the fall to review what went well and what barriers were,
- emphasizing to mentor to keep the ball rolling and maintain the contact,
- encouraging continued connection.

The most feasible change that was generally agreed upon is to encourage continued connections through offering models to the pairs at the beginning of the mentorship. In other words, create (encourage/model) the structure for those who need it

or otherwise wouldn't create it on their own. People will do what they can manage anyway, but offering ways that pairs can structure their individual mentorship is a way to encourage a positive and rewarding relationship. A way to encourage more structure to the mentorship is at the mentor training, which is discussed below.

Suggestions for the mentor training

As previously stated, opinions on the training varied, but everyone offered very good suggestions. There was a general consensus that the presentation could either be eliminated or made more relevant to the mentorship. Suggestions offered included:

- coming to the training with expectations already written up and possible dates to meet with mentor/protégé in the summer,
- focusing more on one-on-one time for the pairs,
- having a potluck get-together so pairs can meet and talk, then have a separate training meeting to discuss expectations and a timeline for the summer,
- leaving the training with a clear schedule of farm visits,
- taking out the presentation altogether,
- keeping the training to one night,
- keeping to group activities at the meeting - one-on-one time can occur privately for pairs.

Overall, the mentor training was a very positive and beneficial experience for the mentorship and only slight adjustments to the presentation seem necessary. The training's strength lies in offering a space and opportunity for pairs to meet one another and begin to plan for their mentorship. In order to facilitate a more productive planning time for the pairs, the presentation could focus more on offering models for pairs to plan their individual mentorships. By strengthening this aspect of the training, barriers in communication could ideally be avoided and compromising busy schedules could be made easier.

Conclusion

The strength of the mentorship experience lies in bringing farmers together to share experience, knowledge, and offer support to beginning farmers. Both mentors and protégés benefit from these relationships and it is for the good of the farming community to maintain this type of interaction. A key area within the Farm Beginnings mentorship program which could use improvement is the mentor training. As a means of gathering mentors and protégés together to begin the foundations of their mentorship, the training does an excellent job.

As a result of this evaluation, it is evident that the training offers an opportunity to encourage pairs to create more structure in their mentorships. This could be done by offering models for pairs to consider, such as: a shared exchange of work, scheduling monthly meetings at each other's farms, entering a financial agreement that binds pairs together (exchange of livestock or machinery), encouraging the mentor to check in on the protégé regularly if protégé does not call with questions, or involving the program coordinator to help facilitate regular interaction.

There are certainly varying degrees of relationships within each mentor/protégé pair and each pair can only manage so much structure. However, it seems advantageous to appeal to those pairs who need the structure the most – those who do not know one another beforehand and find it difficult to discuss expectations at the first meeting. One participant suggested having an informal potluck where pairs meet each other and establish a basis for their relationship. After the pairs have had a chance to meet, a separate meeting could focus more on the logistics of the mentorship. This would involve a presentation of structures for the pairs to consider in planning their individual mentorships. When each pair leaves the meeting, they should have a clear idea of how/when they will interact during the summer. This could involve turning in a plan to the program coordinator.

Finally, even though the mentorship has no official end date and most pairs expect to keep in contact beyond the summer, it would be advantageous to have a wrap-up meeting each fall to discuss how things went during the summer. This way the program could keep up to date with what worked, what didn't, and make necessary adjustments for next year's mentorship.

Appendix

Protégé Questionnaire

Prior expectations

1. What were your expectations of the mentorship before you began? (What were you looking for?)
2. Were these expectations met? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Learning from one another

3. What did you learn from your mentor?
4. How did your interaction with your mentor affect your progress toward your farming goals?
5. What did you do during your visits? How did you and your mentor interact?
6. Did these interactions make information sharing easy?

Effective communication

7. Did you feel you and your mentor were able to communicate effectively?
8. If yes, what helped you communicate easily? If no, what barriers prevented you from doing so?

Connection to the farming community

9. From your experience in the mentorship, do you feel more connected to the farming community? (Do you feel less isolated?)

Future actions

10. What kind of contact do you anticipate having with your mentor in the future?
11. From your experience, would you recommend a mentorship to a beginning farmer?
12. What suggestions might you have for improving the mentorship program?

Mentor training

13. Did you feel the mentor training added to your mentoring experience? How?
14. Did you feel the mentor training was helpful in getting to know your mentor?
15. Did you feel the mentor training was helpful in providing guidance and support to the mentoring process? Why or why not?
16. Do you have any suggestions for improving the mentorship training?

Mentor Questionnaire

Prior expectations

1. What were your expectations of the mentorship before you began? (What were you looking for?)
2. Were these expectations met? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Learning from one another

3. What did you do during your visits? How did you and your protégé interact?
4. Did these interactions make information sharing easy?

Effective communication

5. Did you feel you and your protégé were able to communicate effectively?
6. If yes, what helped you communicate effectively? If no, what barriers prevented you from doing so?

Connection to the farming community

7. From your experience in the mentorship, do you feel more connected to the farming community? (Do you feel less isolated?)

Future actions

8. What kind of contact do you anticipate having with your protégé in the future?
9. In the future, would you mentor a beginning farmer?
10. What suggestions might you have for improving the mentorship program?

Mentor training

11. Did you feel the mentor training added to your mentoring experience? How?
12. Did you feel the mentor training was helpful in getting to know your mentor?
13. Did you feel the mentor training was helpful in providing guidance and support to the mentoring process? Why or why not?
14. Do you have any suggestions for improving the mentorship training?